



On the Path to a Greener Prairie



Workers excavated the northern part of the landfill in 1999.

Kerr-McGee

Runners, walkers, and bicyclists enjoying the Illinois Prairie Path near Chicago can breathe a little easier as they pass one stop along the 55-mile recreational trail—Reed-Keppler Park. For more than 40 years, an 11-acre site in the 100-acre park served as a landfill for thorium mill tailings from the Kerr-McGee Rare Earths Facility, and was a health and environmental threat to the 15,000 residents who live within 3 miles of the park. Today, residents using the Illinois Prairie Path or relaxing in the park can enjoy softball fields, a swimming pool, soccer fields, a skateboarding area, tennis courts, and picnic pavilions surrounded by grassy fields and shady oak trees.

After the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) made cleaning up the park a priority, the Agency worked closely with the potentially responsible party—the Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation—as well as the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, the city of West Chicago, the West Chicago Park District, and community residents to remove all contamination and restore the site back to its natural state.

Kerr-McGee Reed-Keppler Park Site

For 42 years, from 1931 to 1973, the Kerr-McGee Rare Earths Facility in West Chicago, Illinois, extracted radioactive thorium and other elements (both radioactive and non-radioactive) from monazite and other ores, as well as produced gaslight mantles, mesothorium, and hydrofluoric acid. Thorium mill tailings, which are the waste materials from the facility's operations, were used as fill and disposed of in four sites, one of which is the grounds of Reed-Keppler Park in West Chicago. An 11-acre former sand and gravel quarry in the park was used as a landfill for the mill tailings for many years and became heavily polluted.

Excessive levels of contamination were found at Reed-Keppler Park. In 1990, EPA added the park to Superfund's National Priority List and, in 1993, began an investigation to learn the scope of the contamination. Using the results of the investigation, EPA decided that contamination posed a major risk and issued a time-critical action memorandum, which implemented an expedited plan to excavate and dispose of the radioactive wastes off-site.

JUST THE FACTS:

- EPA decided that the contamination at Reed-Keppler Park posed a major risk and implemented an expedited plan for excavating and disposing radioactive wastes off-site.
- Kerr-McGee excavated and disposed of more than 114,600 cubic yards of contaminated soil, relocated some utilities, replaced some groundwater monitoring wells, and reseeded and landscaped the site.
- Residents were closely involved with the cleanup effort. They formed the Thorium Action Group and attended the intergovernmental forums that were held about every six weeks to discuss cleanup plans and activities.

During the cleanup, Kerr-McGee built new parking areas and a perimeter roadway, which allowed residents to enjoy other areas of the park without being disturbed by the cleanup work.

Planting the Seeds of Cooperation

Shortly after issuing the action memorandum, EPA issued a Unilateral Administrative Order to Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation and the city of West Chicago to carry out the longer-term cleanup effort. The work began in 1997, with Kerr-McGee agreeing to excavate contaminated material at the site. More than 114,600 cubic yards of contaminated soil was excavated and transported to a disposal facility.

During the cleanup, Kerr-McGee built new parking areas and a perimeter roadway, which allowed residents to enjoy other areas of the park without being disturbed by the cleanup work. The company, working with the city of West Chicago and the West Chicago Park District, also backfilled and graded the excavated parts of the site. In addition, Kerr-McGee relocated some utilities, replaced some groundwater monitoring wells, and reseeded and landscaped the site so park visitors could enjoy the grounds again.

Residents were closely involved with the effort as well. They formed the Thorium Action Group and attended the intergovernmental forums that were held about every six weeks, attended by West Chicago aldermen, the West Chicago Park District, Illinois EPA, U.S. EPA, and Kerr-McGee.

Cleanup and restoration of the area was officially completed in November 2000, at a cost of \$33 million. The close cooperation between all parties led to the removal of radioactive and other hazardous materials in a popular community park, and ensured that the park will continue to be a popular stop along the Illinois Prairie Path.

CONTACTS:

Timothy Fischer, Remedial Project Manager EPA
Region 5, (312) 886-5787

Visit the EPA Region 5 web site at:

<http://www.epa.gov/region5/Superfund>



*Crop Circles? No, just new softball fields
where residents can enjoy a favorite
summer pastime.*